

EDITORIAL

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Houses Divided on Warming

It's going to be hard enough to find common political ground on global warming without the likes of Representative Joe Barton harassing reputable scientists who helped alert the world to the problem in the first place.

Mr. Barton is chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and thus has great influence over energy strategy, which badly needs updating to address issues like warming. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Mr. Barton has also been a leading beneficiary of campaign funds from the oil, gas and utility industries, which have belittled the warming threat and resisted regulatory efforts to control the burning of fossil fuels. Mainstream scientists believe such fuels are responsible for the warming trend in the last century.

Mr. Barton, a Texas Republican, has zeroed in on three climatologists - Michael Mann, Raymond Bradley and Malcolm Hughes - who have presented influential data showing a sharp rise in global temperatures in recent decades.

Their conclusions have never been convincingly challenged, and indeed have received strong support from other researchers taking different analytical paths. Nevertheless, Mr. Barton has peppered the three scientists and the National Science Foundation, which underwrote some of their research, with endless demands for documentation, including, in the foundation's case, checks and bank statements. A Barton spokesman says such requests are a "common exercise" of committee responsibility.

But Sherwood Boehlert of New York - a fellow Republican who is chairman of the House Science Committee and an enlightened moderate on environmental issues - seemed much closer to the truth when he described Mr. Barton's inquisition as "an effort to intimidate scientists rather than learn from them, and to substitute Congressional political review for scientific peer review."

Mr. Barton's antics make one all the more grateful for the more responsible attitude displayed in the Senate, particularly by Pete Domenici, a conservative senator from New Mexico. A longtime global warming skeptic, Mr. Domenici has been open to new information, read the literature on the subject and accepted the need for mandatory controls on greenhouse gas emissions. On Thursday, Mr. Domenici took time out from the energy bill negotiations to hold the first in a series of hearings intended to lead to meaningful and politically acceptable emissions controls.

There are many good ideas out there, including some that may be too aggressive for Mr. Domenici's taste, including a very sound bill sponsored by John McCain and Joseph Lieberman. One hopes, however, that Mr. Domenici will be as hospitable to inclusive debate as Mr. Barton has been hostile.